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Some Causes and Cures for Truancy in the Elementary School

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SOME CAUSES AND CURES FOR TRUANCY IN THE ELEMENTARY
SCHOOL

--- by ---

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OUTLINE

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Some Causes and Cures for Truancy in the Elementary School

I. Introduction

A truant boy I pass'd my bounds
To enjoy a
To enjoy a ramble on the banks of Thames.
- Cowper, Task

They lost their time and truanted in the fundamental
grounds of saving knowledge.
- Milton

Purpose and Scope

Truancy has by now been with us long enough to urge us to note some causes and cures, if there is anything fundamental and permanent in experimentation. It is the purpose of this discussion to help the teacher reorganize her problem and work out remedies here suggested. Toward this effort is first made to give a historical background with statements of some of the psychological and the natural causes of truancy, its dangers, and its remedies.

Definition and Statement of Problem

A truant is one who refuses to attend school to which he is sent by his parents or guardian. Truancy is not a crime, but it leads to all sorts of juvenile offenses. The truant, if left to himself, may develop criminal tendencies in the course of time. The disobedience to parents or guardian,

which is the beginning of truancy, is a violation of the family code, and it leads inevitably to the breaking of other laws.

"To lag behind with truant pace," says Dryden, gives us a picture of one who shirks or neglects duty, especially, a child who stays away from school without leave. The characteristics of this truant are idleness, loitering, wandering, shirking duty or business.

The problem forced is the, "why of truancy", and "the how of the truant," who even disturbs the complacency of an otherwise well-regulated system. Some suggestive remedies are offered as approved by our leading educators and tested to an appreciable degree in the elementary schools of my city.

Historical Background

Nature made Galveston an island. A real treasure island and decked its miles of long sandy beach with oleanders of every hue. Man visualized the future greatness of this jewel and constructed a neck, "The Causeway", that joins the island to the mainland; therefore transforming the island into a peninsula.

The causeway gives every access to Galveston. The "mainlanders" joined the continuous stream of other folk seeking urban advantages there, thus swelling the number greatly. The population increased more than twenty thousand in a very short time. The enrollment of the schools increased in proportion to the increase in the population. A large per cent of the numbers of this new group (chiefly) Mexicans and Italians, were individuals

accustomed to farm and Nomadic-life.

The children of the families were habituated to a very frequent absences from schools. Truancy took on the magnitude of a prosperous boom. In such a short period of time, the old order of things was hardly recognizable. Reading, writing and arithmetic were minor items on the daily program. The war on the truant and ways and means of punishment for truancy were the main topics of discussion - a problem to cause the hands of a poor teacher to be thrown up in despair.

The native born were proud of their schools. Ranking, at that time among the best in Texas and adjoining states in housing facilities and teaching staff.

The foreigners, especially the Italians, sent their children to school as regularly as the native born, as labor was plentiful and wages high. Among the native born were all the children of the wealthy and cultural families as it was this group of citizens, who financed the schools and imported some of the best teachers to be had, as the salaries were not the amounts easily refused.

II.

The Problem Discussed

At this stage of the school organization, these good teachers failed because the only prescription for this seemingly incurable disease was corporal punishment. Finally, some well-thinking, peace-loving teacher, still hoping, suggested that the turmoil and shouting stop and the personnel of the whole administration go into a laboratory, experiment, note the results of the tests, and save the school from this certain death. The following are the results of some of the experiments.

There are children who play truant whose parents do not keep them out of school to work. Nature has endowed some boys and girls with such strong Nomadic impulses that she seems to say to them: "You must keep out in the open." "You cannot stand it if you sit in school three or four hours a day. It will be better for you to run away from school and even from home and hunt in the woods, or fish, swim or hide in the straw stacks and steal your food from the farmers, or join a gang and make raids on fruit shops, candy stores and the like." All of which gives a large number of truants.

Cause of Truancy

The per centage of truancy from an economical standpoint, at first, was small, but increased very rapidly as the present crisis spread throughout the city. It developed that some of the pupils, especially, the boys were truants because the classroom activities did not appeal to them. Thus loss of time caused them to be placed in retarded groups. They objected to membership in these groups, and usually dropped out of school, because of their inability to keep up their personal appearances or to provide them-

selves with the necessary materials for classroom work. Helping these children is a very delicate task; hence the direction of school activities with the view to promoting symmetrical growth and development is necessary.

Truancy arises from excessive activity in a child who finds all restraint irksome. It is not always caused by perversity. Not all truants are inherently bad or stupid. The study of case histories, where a thorough investigation is required because of social or otherwise serious maladjustment, discloses this fact. Some very successful men have been truants when boys. Many who subsequently turned out well, did so not because they were bright, but because they were restrained from their tendencies to truancy.

Tony Hart, who achieved considerable success as a dramatist in New York City some years ago, was a graduate of a truant school in Massachusetts. Interest usually accompanies or follows successful achievement. There was a boy who used to run away from school and experiment with a piece of apparatus which he had contrived in a deserted cemetery upon the top of a tomb. The apparatus subsequently made him famous. A duplication of such cases serve to show that truants should not be treated as mere criminals; through vocational guidance, their interests and aptitudes may be developed. As one writer has said, "Dealing with the problem child calls for expert technique and requires a thorough knowledge of home, social and school environment,"

Natural

The principal cause of truancy is the neglect of duty by parents. It goes without saying that many parents are not worthy of their names. They are far less fit to have the training of children than wild beast and domestic animals are to care for their young. Not infrequently do the occupations of

parents, the hard lot of earning a living for their children, and the cares which they cannot throw off, so absorb them that they are, more or less, forced to neglect the training of their children. Often the dissolute habits of parents demand the small earnings of their children more than the proper training and the ultimate welfare of these offspring. Still other groups are willing to shirk the duty which nature places upon them when they become parents, and turn over to the public the support and the whole education of their children. In making any provision for truants, then, an important part of work is to compel parents to live up to their obligations. If truants are to be well trained and taken care of, no parent should be permitted to allow his children to become dependent, in order that the child may be cared for by the public. The possibility of such a result, in any considerable number of cases, could counter-act the effects of the best provisions for truants. Parents have not done their whole duty when they turn their children over to the public to be educated. The public schools may do much; their influence for good is incalculable. Schools cannot fulfill all of the duties which the parent should perform.

Psychologists

It has long been known that people differ in ability, interest, habits, physical stature and strength, use of native tongue - in brief, in practically every conceivable trait. But it has been only within ^{in the last fifteen years} that attempts have been made to isolate and measure objectively specific abilities, interests or aptitudes or to devise ways and means of adapting education to individual differences in these traits in such a way as to insure maximum efficiency.

With this information as a basis from which to work, the case of a truant may be conditioned by factors other than intelligence. Recently proper adaptation of the curriculum to the individual's educational, social and moral development is one means of increasing truancy.

Whatever may be the cause of truancy, it is the duty of the public to provide for truants and to prevent truancy. This duty arises not from mere benevolence in the care for the welfare of the truant, but from the necessity of protecting good children from the demoralizing influence of truants and protecting society from delinquents when they become men.

Danger of Truancy

The truant has in him, generally speaking, the making of an excellent citizen or a cunning or dangerous criminal. Modern schools aim to make all materials and instruction interesting to the pupils; in fact a real interest of some sort is essential to progress in study. Yet, sometimes the attempt to sugar-coat every school duty is not successful; therefore, no royal road to learning has been found. From these, more or less hard duties, the wholesome discipline and restraint of the school, the truant runs away. He likes better the entertainment and freedom of the street, and eventually becomes a seasoned delinquent. For the repeated admonition, given by the principal of the school to the habitual truant, can be substituted interest, sympathy and advice. If this tactful course fails, the youth is transferred to another school, when removed from his associates, amidst new surroundings, his feeble attempt at reformation may be re-enforced, and perhaps a new interest in his studies may be awakened. If he persists in

his truancy the attendance officer takes him in hand and administers fresh warnings. When all this fails to reform him, he is brought before the court and in some cases a probation is granted, but he should be sent to a truant school. After these preliminary steps, and since the boy is a chronic truant, the sentence should be terminated only when he is reformed, or when he has reached the age of twenty one.

Laws

Now, there is a tendency to enforce compulsory laws more rigorously than in the past. As the schools are not able to prevent truancy, there must be officers who will keep track of truants and see that they conform to the law and remain in school full time - every day when it is in session until they are at least fourteen years of age. The truant officers have a very important, and at the same time, a very delicate task to perform. Truant officers are being appointed in increasing numbers each year for the purpose of enforcing the compulsory law.

Provisions for Truancy

In dealing with the truants, recourse should not be had solely at the criminal courts. The smell of a criminal ^{court} should not taint and destroy the fine quality of self respect that must be stimulated, created when necessary, and depended on for reformation. All the proceedings should be conducted in a room set apart for this purpose. If a judge ever sits in a criminal court, he should act in a different capacity, under a different title, and in a different room when dealing with truants. Sending a truant

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to a detention home often puts him in the environment that is tainted with criminal elements.

Sentiment

The reformation of truants in the truant schools should be conducted with kindness, but firmness, which is paternal in the best sense, and so far removed from any maudlin sentimentality, as it is from harshness and cruelty. It should rest upon the sincerest interest in the welfare of the boy. It should depend upon the quality of manliness, self-respect and trustworthiness, sparks of which are to be found in every normal child.

Remedies

A truancy school is to be located in this city. (Note that as yet it remains only a plan. The bond issue was not passed at the time proposed). The plans, nevertheless, designate a large space removed from the heart of the city, in a spot picturesque (rather than valuable in money) with running water, woods and fields, a horizon broad and varied where the sunshine and the sunsets are glorious and golden; with cattle and crops, but a restraining fence or walls, and no bar nor bolt, nor lock, nor cell. In such a school it is possible to restrain the boys from wayward tendencies. True reform is hindered by locks, and prison cells. Manliness is developed by the exercise of compulsory self-restraint.

More than 200,000 cases were investigated by officers. Any officer can lead a boy to the school room but the whole force can not keep him there; only the teacher can do that. There must be a power stronger than rattan, bolts or bars for holding children in school. It must be the

kindly, personal influence of the teacher. Why should a boy play truant in one room and not in the other? Why should some teachers keep an officer running hither and thither every day in the week and other teachers never need them?

As an aid toward solving the problem our city has adopted the slogan, "The more education, the better for the individual, the community, the State and the nation". Anyone will be impressed with the rôle which the school is playing in the city life if he will only take a trip through the city and observe our school buildings and facilities for carrying on school work. In Galveston we are constantly increasing our facilities and extending our opportunities and requirements.

We are becoming convinced that we must require our pupils to spend more time each year in school than has been the practice heretofore; so we have gradually extended the school year until it goes through the summer, that is, we have planned it so, and in the near future we hope these plans to be put into execution.

Larger Administration - Staff

To the administrative staff is being added continually a membership sufficiently adequate to take care of each new division developed in the expansion program.

The faculty has almost doubled with properly qualified teachers and principals who have sufficient ability to present the materials of the program, in the department, being equipped to direct study, projects, socialization and individualization.

Additional School, Etc.

Spacious bookrooms are now provided for the additional textbooks provided as guides for further development. The supplementary readers, many and varied, furnish additional interesting information about many things the pupils may not get during the regular lesson period. Some of the Parent-Teacher Clubs of the white school have equipped their individual schools with libraries for young folk.

Some one has said, a thorn in the foot is easier than the frown of a domineering tyrannical teacher. Sometimes one creeps into the school-room, an unkind, oppressive discipline gives the pupils a hatred for the school. The children often play truant, not for the happiness to be found outside, but to escape the misery, as they think inside.

Why should not the grace and loveliness of manner and character that the young teachers should have acquired from the contact with accomplished instructors in all the years of their training, be displayed in the school room? With whom should they be lovely and gentle, though firm and decided, if not with those whose character they are shaping and molding? Shakespeare said that it was Desdemona's sweet voice, that would have charmed the savageness out of a bear.

Truancy is sometimes caused by the failure of the teachers to interest their pupils in the school studies. There are not many cases of this kind, but it is not surprising that there should be some such cases. But many cases arise as a result from failure of teachers to interest their pupils in education for life.

The influence of this was emphasized in a series of lectures entitled "The Alabaster Box" read to us by our Superintendent ever hoping,

yet fearful lest for one moment one of his teachers should falter.

To quote: "He (meaning the teacher) is an idealist and a dreamer. He is always seeing a far goal of life, culture and achievement for his pupils. He is always dreaming, too of the kind of world he is building through their lives. Much of the excellence of his work results from the fact that he ^{is} always reaching toward something that is, as yet beyond him..

"He is an enthusiast for life. He feels the thrill of it, and believes thoroughly in its worthwhileness.. Therefore, he is willing to serve it and his best effort is to translate facts into terms of character, thought, personality, and action. He has a great soul, and the greatness of his soul is contagious. Other people catch it without quite knowing why or how.

III

Summary

"In the final analysis, of course, as a tree is judged by its fruit he is unfailingly recognized by the results of his work. If one fails to kindle a light in the souls of his pupils he is not a great teacher. If his work does throw a new radiance across the field of life for those who sit under his instruction, then he is indeed a man of genius. The work of a teacher is to build life, and the success with which he does it is the measure of his greatness or efficiency.

"Search yourself, it may be that your light may be a little dim. Cultivate it that you may radiate sufficiently to include your truant and exclude truancy. ---The Alabaster Box.

Fortunately, we are reducing truancy in some measure by making school life less irksome for boys and girls who feel an irresistible longing to be continuously doing something adventurous. It is not impossible that the time may come when we shall be able to teach children so that even the most restless of them will about as soon be in school as to be climbing trees, throwing stones, roaming about the country, or forming gangs and fighting other gangs.

As a result of the survey or study which has been made upon the subject of truancy, it is evident that the responsibility rests upon the teacher in that it is her duty to make her work so attractive that the child will have no desire to remain away from school, thus eliminating the tendency "to lag behind with truant pace. "

B I B L I O G R A P H Y

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